

APPEAR

ON PAGE 2-A

WASHINGTON TIMES
30 October 1985

McFarlane's full statement doesn't reverse MIA policy

By Roger Fontaine
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A complete accounting of Americans missing in action and the possibility that prisoners of war still are alive in Southeast Asia has become a tangled and potentially explosive issue for the Reagan administration.

This legacy of the Vietnam war resurfaced two weeks ago when National Security Adviser Robert C. McFarlane's off-the-record remarks on the possibility that POWs were alive found their way onto the pages of The Wall Street Journal.

The comments, made in response to questions on the MIA-POW controversy, seemed to indicate that the Reagan administration had changed policy — in private at least. The public disclosure of the remarks, it was suggested, left the administration in an embarrassing position.

In particular, Mr. McFarlane was quoted as saying he believed there were POWs still alive in Vietnam, and that the United States had not

done enough, at least, in its effort to collect more intelligence on possible survivors.

These pronouncements were in sharp contrast to earlier administration statements that the POW-MIA issue had the "highest priority" for President Reagan, and that satisfactory progress had been made.

Reagan administration officials, however, deny any change in policy or that the issue has lost its priority.

In reply to the press accounts of the remarks made at a luncheon sponsored by two syndicated columnists, the White House immediately said that Mr. McFarlane's reported statements were a "gross misrepresentation" of his real views.

Although officials have declined further public statement, administration sources say that characterization still holds.

An examination of the full text of Mr. McFarlane's actual remarks which were in response to three questions tends to substantiate the administration view.

In his response to the first question, regarding recurring reports of live sightings, Mr. McFarlane called the problem "very anguishing." "You want to believe" these reports, he said, "given by people that have no ulterior motives; they have no reason to lie."

But in a passage that immediately followed, and was not included in earlier press reports, Mr. McFarlane laid out the complexity of the problem:

"And so you try your best to check out every one of these and you use your own intelligence through third countries, to try to find out: Does anybody know anything about what is reported here that happened in X city and Y place at Z date?"

In the succeeding passage, also left out of the press accounts, Mr. McFarlane added that while the volume of reports is great — leaving some with the impression that a cover-up is going on — "I have to tell you, I have leaned on DIA [the Defense Intelligence Agency] and gone into it and had my guys looking through every chapter and verse on it [to see] if there is any basis for credible belief there are live persons. And I come away saying that we haven't yet found the evidence."

After stating what existing intelligence so far had shown, Mr. McFarlane then said "there have to be live Americans over there" — a statement that was quoted in press accounts as one indication that the White House had shifted position.

But a personal belief or feeling about an emotional issue, administration sources say, does not constitute a change in policy. Nor does Mr. McFarlane's other quoted comment that "there are things that we haven't done that we can do, and we're working on that," indicate any change either, these sources insist.

Administration sources also insist, as Mr. McFarlane did last July in public remarks made to the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, that doing more has been hampered by the "inertia" of the Carter administration.

That inertia, according to the national security adviser, "had translated into an almost hopeless acceptance of the status quo by our government and a perception by the Vietnamese and Lao governments that it was not particularly important to us."

In additional off-the-record remarks, not previously disclosed, the national security adviser was even more explicit on the difficulties faced by the Reagan administration at the beginning:

"We finally got it into their [the Vietnamese] heads that we are not going to talk about normalization or aid programs or anything else until they account for all of our people. I think they didn't believe that in the last administration, and they do now."

Part of that inertia also affected intelligence collection, particularly human intelligence about MIAs and POWs. It was that deficiency, administration sources say, that Mr. McFarlane was referring to. But these sources added that this type of intelligence is the most difficult to improve particularly in the short-term.

"What you need to do is to have better intelligence in Vietnam. Now, we don't, and it takes a long time to get it," Mr. McFarlane said. "But I wouldn't pretend to you that we have done enough to even start. And that's bad. And that's a failure."

None of this — including the need to do more, and the failure to do as much as would be desirable — is a departure from past policy or belief, administration sources say.

That policy is to press diplomatically for an accounting by the involved governments; improve intelligence collection; and above all, not to close the books "until all your questions about the missing and about possible prisoners of war are answered."